



Editor: Irit Back. Assistant Editors: Brandon Friedman and Inbal Ben Yehuda
Volume 3, Number 1, 26 June, 2017

Al-Shabaab's Resurgence in the Horn of Africa: Factors Contributing to the Group's Persistence

Alexander Takele

Since the middle of 2016, Al-Shabaab has reemerged as a formidable threat to peace and security in the Horn of Africa. Al-Shabaab's operations have steadily declined since Operation Linda Nchi in 2011, during which the Africa Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and Somali Government troops recaptured territory previously under Al-Shabaab's control. Although Al-Shabaab continued to control large swaths of land in southern Somalia, it was not able to maintain its hold on towns or major cities until recently.

The resurgence of the al-Qa'ida linked group seems to be connected to broader developments both inside and outside of Somalia and does not necessarily reflect Al-Shabaab's ability or strength. This essay will examine how AMISOM's new troop reduction will affect Al-Shabaab's presence in the Horn of Africa and assess whether it still presents challenge to peace and security in the Horn of Africa

Ethiopia's Troop Withdrawal and AMISOM

AMISOM's role has been crucial for the peace and security of Somalia and the region as a whole. Since its inception in 2007, AMISOM has assisted the Somali government forces in fighting Al-

Shabaab and other Islamic militant groups. AMISOM was originally comprised of 22,000 troops from five countries – Uganda, Ethiopia, Kenya, Djibouti, and Burundi. However, this was less than half of the 47,000 troops recommended by counter-insurgency doctrine to stabilize and secure Somalia.¹ AMISOM's forces have been reduced in recent months, as Ethiopia has withdrawn 4,300 of its soldiers. AMISOM also stands to lose another 6,000 Ugandan soldiers by the end of 2017.

In early October 2016, Ethiopia declared a State of Emergency following a year of anti-government protests in which hundreds of protesters were killed and thousands detained. Shortly after, Ethiopia began abruptly withdrawing its troops from southern and central Somalia. Although the Ethiopian government has denied that its troop withdrawal is connected to the unrest at home, the circumstances suggest otherwise. The government claims it has called its troops home due to the financial burden of maintaining its forces in Somalia.

Ethiopia's withdrawal came as a surprise to the Somali government, AMISOM, and even to Al-Shabaab. Ethiopia's troops are the most experienced and battle hardened of the AMISOM peacekeeping force. They have been involved in the conflicts in Somalia since 2006, gaining valuable counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism experience, which has allowed them to keep Al-Shabaab at bay. Ethiopia's sudden withdrawal has been a blessing and a change of fortune for Al-Shabaab. The Ethiopians withdrew from more than 10 towns in the south and central regions of Somalia. Their absence has allowed Al-Shabaab to swiftly fill the vacuum during the past six months, recapturing most of these towns without firing a single shot.

The loss of Ethiopia's military manpower and experience coupled with the inexperience of Somali government troops makes the fight against Al-Shabaab difficult for AMISOM. EU budget cuts to AMISOM have allowed Al-Shabaab to take advantage of AMISOM's limited resources. Al-Shabaab has used large swaths of Somali land as safe havens, given that AMISOM does not have the necessary resources to monitor such a broad chunk of territory. With AMISOM operations

¹James Barnett, "What Ethiopia's Withdrawals from AMISOM Mean for Somalia", *African Arguments*, 17 October 2016. Accessed 21 June 2017. <http://africanarguments.org/2016/10/27/what-ethiopias-withdrawal-from-amisom-means-for-somalia/>

expected to be concluded in 2020, and troop withdrawal to begin by 2018, it is difficult to imagine how it will succeed in ridding Somalia of Al-Shabaab.²

The Spillover Effect of Al-Shabaab operations

For the past year Al-Shabaab has managed to carry-out devastating terror attacks in central and southern regions of Somalia. It has been responsible for more than 20 attacks since mid-2016. The most significant attacks were an attack on a Kenyan military base in which 57 soldiers were killed in June 2016; a January 2017 suicide bombing in Mogadishu that killed 28 people; and the June 2017 storming of a military compound in Puntland, which killed 70 people.³

In addition, Somalia's neighbors in the Horn of Africa are still targets of Al-Shabaab terrorism. Since the beginning of May 2017, Kenya has been repeatedly hit by terror attacks in the Mandera area, in northeastern Kenya, including an attack that targeted the regional governor and killed eight members of his security detail. The Mandera region has always been a prime target for Al-Shabaab due to its proximity to the border with southern Somalia, which is partly controlled by Al-Shabaab.⁴ There have also been foiled Al-Shabaab operations in both Kenya and Ethiopia. Al-Shabaab takes advantage of Somalia's vast and unmonitored borders with Kenya and Ethiopia to carry out its attacks. Although both countries have a significant Somali population, a long border with Somalia, and have contributed to the AMISOM force, Al-Shabaab has only managed to attack Kenyan targets successfully and failed to carry out a successful attack or operation in Ethiopia. The security apparatus in Ethiopia is often credited with being more capable than its neighbors due

² James Jeffrey, "Ethiopian Troop Withdrawal from Somalia Exposes Peacekeeping Problems", *France 24*, 16 December 2016. Accessed 21 June 2017. <http://www.france24.com/en/20161215-ethiopian-troops-withdraw-highlighting-peacekeeping-internationally-funded-peacekeeping>

³ Jason Burke, "Al-Shabaab Fighters Kill Dozens in Attack on Military Base in Somalia", *The Guardian*, 8 June 2017. Accessed 21 June 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/08/al-shabaab-somalia-kill-dozens-attack-military-base>

⁴ Caleb Weiss, "Shabaab Steps-Up Attacks in Kenya", *Threat Matrix, FDD's Long War Journal*, 6 June 2017. Accessed 21 June 2017. <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/06/shabaab-steps-up-attacks-in-kenya.php>

to its experience in dealing with different militant opposition forces that have operated in the north of the country for the past 20 years and the Somali Ogaden region for the past 40 years.⁵

It is difficult to assume that Al-Shabaab has an international scope, however, the group has been able to radicalize and recruit youngsters from the West, primarily from the Somali diaspora. International recruits receive weapons training, intelligence gathering, suicide attacks and the like to fight AMISOM and Somali Government forces. This gives Al-Shabaab an international dimension.

Al-Shabaab's Internal and External Resources of Funding

Al-Shabaab financiers range from states to charities and individuals. Apart from donations, Al-Shabaab, it is said, has been able to generate money on its own, and its sources of funding underscore its international support. The diaspora is still Al-Shabaab's strongest source of funding.⁶ Based on clan membership, the diaspora continues to pump money through Somali "hawalas" (informal money transfer networks). Al-Shabaab independently generates funds by extorting money from businesses, hijacking humanitarian aid, kidnapping, and receiving payment from the Dubai-based Dahabshil money transfer company for services it provides in the regions it controls. The group has also been able to tax residents living in those Somali regions.

Now that Al-Shabaab is back on the offensive, it is likely to seek control over the port city of Kismayo, which it effectively used before it was driven out by AMISOM in 2011. During its time in Kismayo, Al-Shabaab heavily taxed as much as 30 percent of the import-export business

⁵ Daniel Torbjörnsson, "Explaining the Differences in al-Shabaab Expansion into Ethiopia and Kenya", *FOI: Swedish Defence Research Agency*, May 2017. <https://www.foi.se/download/18.2798873115c0ac874a84d5/1494935094959/Daniel+Torbj%C3%B6rnsson+al-Shabaab.pdf>

⁶ For example, one-third of the Somali diaspora lives in the West with estimated 280,000 in the EU, UK, Norway, and Switzerland, and 170,000 residing in North America. For more data, see: Phillip Connor and Jens Manuel Krogstad, "5 Facts about the Global Somali Diaspora", *Fact Tank: News in Numbers*, *Pew Research Center*, 1 June 2016. Accessed 21 June 2017. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/06/01/5-facts-about-the-global-somali-diaspora/>

through the port, generating an estimated \$1 million quarterly. Al-Shabaab is also believed to be linked with pirates that operate in the Gulf of Aden.

Peace and Security in the Horn of Africa

Security in the Horn of Africa has been elusive for quite some time. Western embassies in the Horn and Eastern Africa have issued travel advisories to their citizens, warning or cautioning against travel in the region. The international community sees the advent of Al-Shabaab as a threat of international peace and security. Al-Shabaab's ties with al-Qa'ida, by definition makes it part of an international terror network.

Historically, there have been large Somali populations in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti. In addition, almost two-thirds of Somali refugees reside in neighboring countries, with Ethiopia and Kenya accommodating almost 1 million refugees between them.⁷ This dispersed population, which shares the same ethnicity, religion, and language has the potential to be fertile ground for Al-Shabaab recruitment. The proximity of the region to the Middle East, primarily Yemen, which has one of the most active al-Qa'ida networks, makes the Al-Shabaab threat even more of a danger to the Horn of Africa.

The Trump administration recently eased restrictions on drone and air strikes that had been put into place by the Obama administration. It has also defined Somalia as an "area of active hostilities," allowing for raids by U.S. special operation forces and conventional forces.⁸ The American government has already initiated drone strikes and ground operations using its elite special forces.⁹ In late March 2017, the Pentagon confirmed that it was sending dozens of troops to Somalia, decades after it pulled out its troops following the Black Hawk Down incident in

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Charlie Savage and Eric Schmitt, "Trump Administration is Said to be Working to Loosen Counterterrorism Rules", *New York Times*, 12 March 2017. Accessed 21 June 2017.

https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/12/us/politics/trump-loosen-counterterrorism-rules.html?_r=1

⁹ Jon Temin, "Somalia and the Limits of U.S Bombing", *New York Times*, 25 May 2017. Accessed 21 June 2017.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/25/opinion/somalia-al-shabaab-us-airstrikes.html>

1993.¹⁰ However, this increased US military activity may not be enough to win the war against Al-Shabaab. The military operations, presumably would push Al-Shabaab out of its newly acquired towns and villages, but they will not diminish Al-Shabaab visible presence in the region.

In February, Somalia elected a new president. Although the new government is still fragile, Somali-American President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed has shown a willingness to confront Islamic militants by declaring a new offensive. The US should help the new government to build its capacity to fight Al-Shabaab. The US and the EU should encourage AMISOM to stay and finish the job by funding its activities. The war against Al-Shabaab cannot be won by drone and air strikes, it requires troops on the ground that can provide a sustained presence for stable security in Somalia.

Alexander Takele holds a M.A in Government Studies from the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) Herzliya, Israel. He is a Research Volunteer at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies at Tel Aviv University.

¹⁰ Joseph Trevithick, "America is Expanding its Secretive War in Somalia", *The War Zone, The Drive*, 31 March 2017. Accessed 21 June 2017. <http://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/8851/america-is-expanding-its-secretive-war-in-somalia?iid=sr-link1>